Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Title: Explore how artists have expressed Gender in art practice providing evidence of at least 2 artist and thinkers

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Question 1 – Explore how artists have expressed Gender in art practice providing evidence of at least 2 artist and thinkers

In this essay I will talk about artists that have responded to sexism and inequalities within the art world but also outside of it. I will investigate Ana Mendieta's work, a she uses her body nd how she uses her gender as a key figure within her work. I will investigate the Guerrilla Girls and how their powerful posters show the institutionalised sexism within the art world and the lack of representation of anyone who is not a 'Straight White Man', and some more artists that are.

In 1971, Linda Nochlin wrote an essay called '*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*'. Within the essay she investigates the blatant favouritism to the white male and showed the institutionalised barriers that make it harder for anyone who is not a white male to become great artists (Churchman, 2021). In the following extract from the essay, she explores the idea of white male privilege in the art world very well.

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. (Nochlin, 1971).

Since this essay was written, women's identity within the art world has improved but there are still significant changes that need to be made.

Throughout history women have not been allowed to attend art school. Before 1860 no women had attended the Royal Academy of Art until Laura Herford who was only allowed to the school by accident. This led onto 34 more female students being admitted over a 10 year period (Bluett, 2021). Whilst these women had to fight to get into an institution that saw them inequal to their male students, this is very different to what art schools look like today. Female students account 60-75% of the student population studying art at university level (Fard, 2017). Due to such a high percentage of female students attending university for art, you would think it fair to assume that hat art museums are mostly comprised of female artwork. However, this really is not the case. In 2013 the East London Fawcett, which is a branch of the wider Fawcett Society, demonstrated this when they found that of 134 commercial galleries in London, representing 3163 artists, only 31% of the artists are women (Louise, 2015).

Fig. 1, Guerrilla Girls 1989.

These inequalities are what brought forward the Guerrilla Girls. In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art held a collaborative exhibition called ‘An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture’. The show included 165 artists but shockingly of those artists, 152 were male and 13 were female. A group of women were outraged and protested outside of the museum. A handful of these women who attended the protest, would later form the Guerrilla Girls (Sayej, 2020). In their piece *‘What do these artists have in common’ (1985)*, it shows a tally of forty-two prominent male artists of the time who show their work in particular galleries that knowingly show less than 10% of female artists (Leng, 2020).

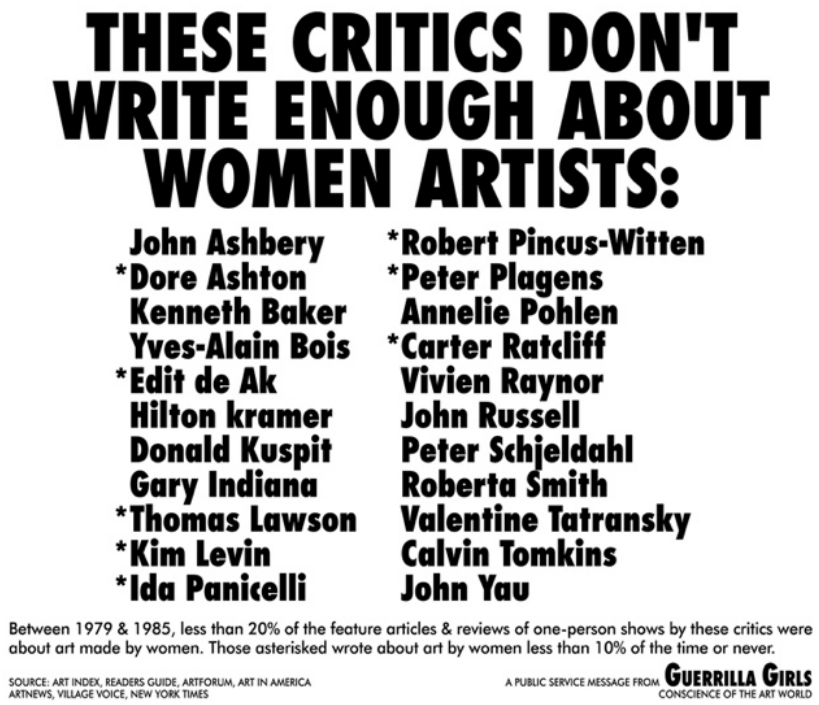

Fig. 2, Guerrilla Girls 1985

By calling out these artists by name, they are emphasising that these male artists are feeding into the institutionalised sexism that was present in the art sector at the time as

they are profiting off keeping women out of the galleries. Posters that followed this were calling out different areas of the art world, such as art critics. In their poster '*These Critics Don't Write Enough About Women Artists' (1985)* (Fig, 2.) they name critics that write about women less that 20% of the time and asterisked the ones that write about women less than 10% of the time or have never written about them. They wanted to embarrass each group and show publicly the inequalities that they were choosing to ignore.

Members of the group are anonymous, they wear gorilla masks to hide their faces and adopt names of deceased female artists and writers, as if "history's neglected women artists were rising from the dead" (Chadwick, 1995). They use the names of Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta and Alma Thomas to name a few. They chose the word 'Girl' for their name because it is used to undermine a woman, to make her feel as if she is still a child. Their aim is to reclaim that word, in the same way that LGBTQ+ activists reclaimed the word 'queer' (Guerrilla Girls, 1995). Their work and presence in the art world grew, for example magazines like Artforum would commission posters from them, the New York Times wrote features about them, and they went around the U.S doing workshops (Chadwick, 1995). Every aspect of their message is to better the art world for future female artists to be able to have the chance to make their work seen and heard. Their work did not finish at the art world. A great example of this is their poster *'Guerrilla Girls Demand a Return to Traditional Values On Abortion (1992)'* (Fig,3). They used this poster in a pro-choice march at

Washington D.C, showing the Catholic Church and 'Right-to-Life' protesters their hypocrisy (Guerrilla Girls, 1992).

Fig. 3, Guerrilla Girls (1992)

In their most recognised piece *'Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into The Met. Museum? (1989)'* (Fig,1), it brings forward an interesting conversation on how women are seen as the muse to the male artist, but they never show the women's work or voice. A term used for this is the 'Male Gaze', which is used to describe the sexualised and objectification of women that inevitably empowers men. The term was first used by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*', where she describes objectification within the visual arts and how women are sexualised for the male viewer (Loreck, 2016). Through art history women have always been the subject of the male gaze, and women were often painted nude to satisfy the male

viewer or buyer of the work (Knepp, 2017). Women wanted to be seen as artists and not be the objects of the male gaze.

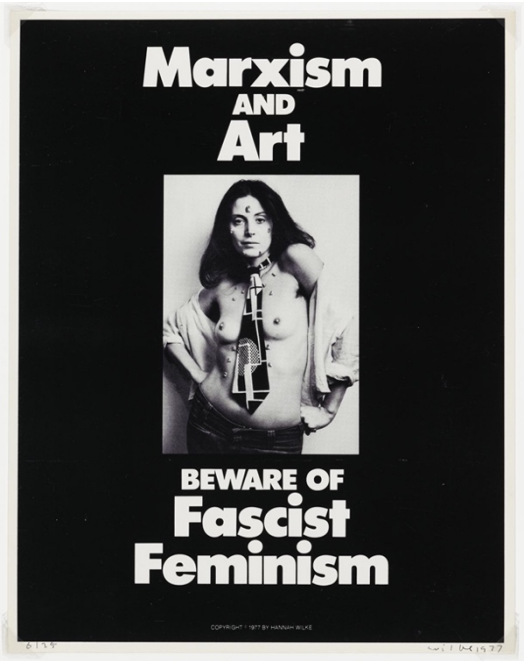

Fig. 4, Hannah Wilkes (1977)

Hannah Wilke is a great example of reclaiming the female body from the male gaze. Wilke was best known for her performances and photographs and how she would use her naked form in her art. Within her work she would use unconventional art materials such as chewing gum and erasers. When describing why chose these materials, she said,

> I choose gum because it is the perfect metaphor for the American woman- chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece. (Williams, 2019).

Wilke's piece *'S.O.S Scarification Object Series' (1974-82)*, a collection of fifty self-portrait photographs, is an example of her using chewing gum in her performances. Wilke gave gum

to the crowd for them to chew it and hand it back when they had softened it, she then moulded the gum to a vulva shape and stuck it onto her body and then photographed herself. The breaking down of the gum and transforming it into something that was once whole is a key to this piece. She saw the gum as a symbol of womanhood, it is smoothed out, made into something society wants, and then rejected (Williams, 2019).

Fig.5, Hannah Wilke (1978-84)

'Marxism and Art' (1977) (Fig, 5), a part of 'S.O.S Scarification Object Series' (1974-82), was a response to criticism received from well-known feminist and art critic Lucy Lippard. Lippard said that Wilke used her body to flaunt her beauty and that is all she is conveying in her art. With the context of the poster, it shows how Wilke is pointing out the harmful prejudices that women can face around the traditional idea of what femininity is and how it can come from women too (Manchester, 2008). Wilke's connection to her

gender and how she felt as a woman in society shows through in her work, and really makes her work important for reclaiming the female body from the male gaze.

In Wilke's piece *'What Does This Represent? What Does You Represent? (1978-84)'* (Fig, 6), she sits naked in high heels, her legs a part and has toy pistols, toy machine guns and other toys around her. It is considered 'aggressively confrontational' (Godfrey, 1998). Tony Godfrey in his book 'Conceptual Art' (1998) dissects this piece well, he talks about how the fetishization of her high heels, the naked female and the toy objects that relate to men, link to male gratification or amusement. However, by doing this she is in control of their desires and not wanting to be a victim of the male objectification, taking the power away from them and reclaiming her female form from the male gaze (Godfrey, 1998).

Fig.6, Ana Mendieta (1973)

Ana Mendieta, Cuban born artist, would use her gender within her practice to talk about subjects that had a personal connection to herself. Like Wilke's pieces, she used her

body in her work. Mendieta followed the feminist stance of putting her body on the line for her art rather that hiring someone else's body (Fateman,2018). Her work consisted of performance art, body art and land art. She would use rituals from her native country and question the treatment of women within society (Rosen, 2018). An example of this is in her work '*Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)' (1972),* she cut and stuck hair from a man's beard onto her face. It was homage to Duchamp's readymade, a term used when an artist takes a manufactured or readymade object, modifies it, to then put it in a different context to mean something else. But it was also a political statement. Mendieta described it as giving her that person's strength, so this was the closest she could get to feeling the power men have in society, and this power becomes the readymade (Godfrey, 1998).

While Mendieta studied at the University of Iowa, she created her confrontational piece *'Untitled (Rape Scene)' (1973)* (Fig, 7). During her studies, the rape and murder of a nursing student Sara Ann Otten was committed by another student attending the university in March 1973. In response to this, a month later Mendieta invited her fellow peers to her apartment, this is where she was bounded across a table with blood all down her behind. Around her were smashed plates and a pool of blood by her feet (Manchester, 2009). When her fellow students arrived at the apartment she remained in that position, invoking her own fears as a woman. She was reclaiming her body and the bodies of other women who were subjected to the male objectification that would just see them as objects for sexual

gratification or just as art (Godgrey, 1998). Mendieta embraced the confrontation within her work, she was questioning the “prurient depiction of rape and the romantic sadism of the woman-as-muse archetype.” (Fateman, 2018).

Fig. 7, Jenny Saville (1999)

An important artist that looks at the female form in a different way is, Jenny Saville. Known for her contemporary paintings, she looks at the female form without the sexualised or overtly perfect female body of the male gaze. Saville became the model and artist of her work, using her own face and body in her paintings. She wanted to paint to show how women really see themselves. Women today are told they need to have this ideal body but

why? Is having this perfect body for them? Or is it just to feed into male gratification that artists like Saville are trying to end. She saw how harmful the way women see themselves because of contemporary pop culture and she wanted to create a new female ideal body, something much more real (Kaiser, 2018). In her works 'Ruben's Flap' (1999) (Fig, 8) and 'Strategy (South Face/ Front Face/ North Face)' (1993-94) this is very much shown. The way the body is positioned on the canvas, in what would be considered an unflattering angle, is beautiful. In a talk with the Independent, Saville talks about her work,

> It's flesh, and the paint itself is the body, but the theory behind each one is essential, as important as the painting, I'm not trying to teach, just make people discuss, look at how women have been made by men. What is Beauty? Beauty is usually the male image of the female body. My women are beautiful in their individuality. (Davies, 1994).

Saville's work feeds into the feminist idea to reclaim the female form from once only being seen through the male gaze. She saw how female artists from the past had been forgotten about and it made her angry in a sense, but also made her want to push to change this in the future. She felt that she needed to paint women who were taught to hate themselves, firstly because they were not what men them wanted them to be but also because of the negative influence diet culture has on women (David, 1994).

Fig. 8, Jenny Saville (2011)

When Saville painted 'The Mothers' (2011), her practice developed more. Her relationship with flesh changed after she entered into motherhood. Following the birth of her two children, Saville was hesitant to bring motherhood into her work, not fully knowing how it could impact her career or her art. Exposing her own internalised sexism to women with children, she realised the same would not be said about male artists (Rysman, 2021). You can see in this painting how she works, the forms that she sketched freely with charcoal, then adding oil paint to bring them forms to life. There are so many different aspects to this painting that you cannot keep your eyes off it. This piece shows a great understanding of a shared human experience that we have when we enter the world between the child and the mother. But unlike the great masters of their time that

influenced this piece, such as Leonardo da Vinci in his drawings of the Virgin and child, she has a better understand of what it is to be a mother and the connection that is shared (Freeman, 2019).

To conclude, these artists have had a massive impact on the art world. Drawing from their lived experiences as a woman, to produce work that is thought provoking and questions their positions in society. With the aim to break the traditional ideas of the women as the muse and reclaim their bodies from the male gaze, they can freely express their gender identity. While there are still obstacles that women still face, we have these women like these to thank for their work that challenged these ideas and gave a voice to many women. Within my research, I would like to further explore the female identity and the differences between feminist art from the 20th century and the 21st century to further understand how things have changed.

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